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A collective response: Feminism, film, performance and Greenham Common

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the part played by four film and video artists as chroniclers as well as participants in the civic struggle against nuclear weapons, providing alternative documents of the women's camp at Greenham Common to those of the official media record. For, as the article will discuss, the model of protest at Greenham was uniquely indebted to, and characterised by, the models of non-violent resistance developed through post-war feminism. As part of this, a strategy of creative resistance had an important role to play: through song and poems, through banners, paintings and drawings; by amateur and professional artists. However, the film and video documents of Greenham Common by Tina Keane, Jo Davis and Lis Rhodes, and Annabel Nicolson, on which this article will focus, are not concerned solely with advocacy for anti-nuclear and political protest, but rather, Greenham proved inspirational for them on an individual basis, enabling them to meaningfully explore how feminist principles might be folded into their experimental practices.

KEYWORDS

Greenham Common women's camp, anti-nuclear protest, Tina Keane, Lis Rhodes, Jo Davis, Annabel Nicolson, post-war feminism

Between 1982 and 1991 an area of common land in Berkshire became the focus for a battle between anti-nuclear protestors and the martial policies of British and American governments. Greenham Common had been requisitioned during WWII as an airfield. Following the end of the war it was retained, and passed over to the American air force by the Ministry of Defence, to serve as one of the strategic European bases for their post-war peace keeping presence. In 1981, it was chosen as the site for nuclear warheads (or Cruise missiles) and became the focus for the strong anti-nuclear movement existing in Britain at this time. That same year, *Women for Life on Earth*, a mixed group of anti-nuclear protestors comprising of 36 women, four men and several children walked from Cardiff on a symbolic march to the Common. As this first group of protestors reached the gates of the air base and chained themselves to it, they created the basis, and base camp for the protests that would prevail there on the outer side of the long perimeter fence for another decade and more. Their protests did not manage to prevent the siting of Cruise missiles at Greenham in 1983, but the arrival of the missiles failed to dislodge the protestors and the site became a potent and controversial point of focus for civic and governmental stand-off on the matter of nuclear weapons – and between left wing protest and the Thatcher government – throughout the decade.

Before turning to the artists in question, I wish to outline the unique conditions at Greenham Common, where a conception of non-violent protest specifically connected to feminist activism was developed, which in turn engendered certain creative approaches to the question of anti-nuclear protest and feminist identity. Characterized by their wider engagement in a critique of normative society and its politics, the strategies of non-violent disobedience forged through the civil protests of the 1950s

and 1960s provided a potent model for the ‘peace camps’ at Greenham. This oppositional stance chimed with the cold war malaise of the counter-culture beyond the single issue of nuclear disarmament.¹ Indeed, as participants observed, the first Greenham protestors were characterized by their wider engagement in the protest culture of the period. Therefore, whilst the anti-nuclear demonstrations at Greenham Common can be traced in the patterns of civil protest against the nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the subterfuge and stand-offs of cold war politics, and early protest initiatives such as DAC (Direct Action Committee against Nuclear War), responsible for organizing the first marches on Aldermaston in 1958, they might also be seen as part of a wider discourse of protest and critical opposition to normative views and values. According to Sasha Roseneil,

[a]lmost everyone, however, had some connection to what might be called ‘counter-cultural networks’ – either overtly politicized, as in the case of campaigning groups, or in a social context, such as groups of friends who were ‘hippies’, ‘alternative types’, vegetarians, co-counsellors, feminists, lesbians or punks [...] [T]he most common way that women were drawn to Greenham was through these connections. (1995:51)

However, at Greenham Common the mode of protest developed beyond this originating model in a number of significant ways. Firstly, it uniquely combined environmental concerns with the discourse of feminist activism, which had burgeoned and gathered momentum since the counter-cultural actions and articulations of the late

¹ For a more detailed account of the development of cold war protest in Britain in relation to the counter-culture see Jeff Nuttall, (1970) *Bomb Culture*, London: Harper Collins.

1960s. The reach of the women's movement by the time of the Greenham protests extended beyond the [legacy of the counter-culture's anti-establishment dissent](#) , benefitting [equally](#) from the infrastructure created around the 'small group' culture of consciousness-raising initiatives, and the widespread protest mobilisation for causes [of specific feminism concern](#), from the call for labour rights to [the fight against](#) domestic violence.² In concert with feminist focused activism, widely read perspectives on woman's relationship to the environment, such as Susan Griffiths's book *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1979), were influential for the associations that they made between nature and female consciousness. Such texts are also notable for their early articulation for an eco-feminism, which [actively opposed](#) industrial damage [to the environment from activities](#) such as mining and road-building, as well as [the development of](#) nuclear power and weaponry.

Environmental concerns in feminist discourse were also raised through what Roseneil has described as, a 'specifically feminist conceptualization of non-violence' (1995:21), which provided a blueprint for future protests such as the Pentagon Women's Action,³ and the encampment at Greenham Common. Following their initial protest at Greenham, what had been at first a mixed group of activists made the decision to become a female only protest, a move that caused some dissent and

² For a detailed contemporary account of the post-war women's movement in Britain see Anna Coote (2nd Ed 1987) *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation*, [Basil Blackwell: Oxford](#).

³ International models of non-violent protest, such as the Pentagon Women's Action in 1980 and 1981 also provided possible models for Greenham. The PWA used passive resistance (going limp when handled by the police) and the collective strategies of linking together to form chains or circles, and the utilization of objects normally associated with women's domestic domain, such as a chain of scarves, and the weaving of a web of multi-coloured threads across entrances to the Pentagon building. [Many of these gestures resurfaced at Greenham.](#)

controversy amongst the group.⁴ One rationale for this separatism stemmed from the strategies for non-violent action developed by the women's movement, locally and internationally, which were, according to Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, pragmatically rooted in the concern that 'men would more readily engage in violent confrontation with the police' (Coote, Campbell 1987: 48). Another, perhaps more nuanced, reason is also hinted at in the recollections of women involved in the early days of the camp, which points to a more individualized need for self determination and a female centred agency for their protest. Barbara Harford and Sarah Hopkins argue that it was seen as 'a step towards countering the media's concentration on male personalities and male-orientated news' (Harford, Hopkins: 1984:19). As one women recalls: '[W]e wanted to get the message across on our own terms' (Harford, Hopkins 1984:20).⁵

The sense of feminist solidarity and mutual support at Greenham also reflected how, by the early 1980s, a wider women's movement across Britain had been mobilised, consisting of strong, well-established and organised, regional and international networks of women's groups, as well as more informal gatherings of younger women on university campuses.⁶ As Coote and Campbell assert, 'it is hard to imagine it

⁴ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell refer to this process as engendering 'much disagreement and discussion between the women themselves' (Coote, Campbell 1987:48).

⁵ Other reasons are suggested in Harford and Hopkins's contemporary account of Greenham Common, such as a need to undermine the male connection to armed combat, as one women says, 'you won't achieve disarmament unless you remove the desire and need for men to fight [...] I think the future rests with women' (1984:24).

⁶ Coote and Campbell emphasize the collective roots of the movement when they argue that, 'it was more than a federation of small groups. It was a collective experience accumulated over nearly 20 years, and it continued to grow and change. It was reformist and revolutionary. It was a source of

[Greenham] happening at all – and impossible to imagine it gaining the strength that it did – if the women’s liberation movement had not already come into being, and spread a sense of what women could achieve’ (1987: 47). However, Sasha Roseneil’s research into those who gravitated to Greenham suggests that the connections to the women’s movement were diverse. She notes that

some identified as radical feminists, others as lesbian feminists, or just feminists. Far more women, however, while expressing more or less generalized dissatisfaction with the existing gender order, had not been active in the women’s liberation movement [...] To adopt the identity ‘feminist’ in the early 1980s still required considerable bravery, and ‘I’m not a feminist, but...’ was a phrase often on women’s lips. (Roseneil 2000:50)

Building on these models and a diverse constituency, the protest at Greenham was constructed of two forms of activism operating in dialogue with each other. Firstly, the mobilization of feminist networks across the country brought women to Greenham for specific events, such as the famous Embrace the Base event of 1982, when 30,000 women joined hands around nine miles of perimeter fence. Netta Cartwright, one of the participants remembers:

The first time we had a couple of coaches full of women from Stafford and Stoke-on-Trent – we were mostly women from Women’s Liberation and Women’s Aid groups. We went to Embrace the Base. When we arrived we were overwhelmed by the crowds of women jostling, singing and linking arms

political energy, a developing body of theory, a battleground, a sisterhood’ (1987: 51).

around the whole of the perimeter fence [...] We decorated and wove the wire with poems, ribbons, photos, flowers, and embroidery. It was a wonderful day full of songs and laughter and we carried on all the way home on the buses.

(Cartwright 2015, online)

Highly visible actions like this, which gathered female protestors from across generations and classes, and from all around the country, brought the Greenham protests not only to the attention of mainstream news, but also made it a rallying point for female solidarity and support more generally. The Embrace the Base event was organised by horizontal methods of communication such as a ‘tree telephone’ (one person calls two others and they then call two more) and by circular letter. As Cartwright’s reminiscence suggests, protestors organised to travel by coach and car through the regional feminist networks [which had been](#) established [during the development of](#) the women’s movement in Britain.

A second mode of action involved the concurrent establishment of residential encampments, which differed from earlier political dissent that had found expression in [the staging of](#) discrete events. Although local bailiffs tried to disrupt the camp and move the women out by invoking local bylaws, the occupation took on a certain permanence, and a defined political meaning [became](#) embedded in the [annexation](#) of the territory around the perimeter fence. Greenham now provided a permanent point of destination for women with a range of different concerns beyond those of the anti-nuclear lobby. The women only camps were now clustered around the entrance gates to the military facility (at the points where the trucks and tanks would go in and out carrying the missiles). These entrance points took on the names of the colours of the

rainbow, such as yellow gate, blue gate, green gate etc., utilising another strategy of non-violent protest, by playfully addressing the grey tones associated with military uniformity.

As the rainbow coloured camp names suggest, these unique conditions created a rich environment for a creative protest that exceeded the bounds of a professionalized art practice. Guy Brett observes, ‘in these circumstances the two sides of art, which have become separated, met and fused: art as the specialized preoccupation of a small minority, and art as the need to give form to one’s feelings and ideas, which everyone possesses’ (Brett 1986:139). Brett is referring to the decoration of the fence with clothing, toys, banners, messages, letters and drawings by the women who visited, which he refers to as a ‘giant collage’, one that he felt ‘realized, even if unselfconsciously, the modernist aesthetic of creating new meanings by combining mass-produced objects in an unexpected context where they become powerful “signs”’ (Brett 1986:139). I would argue that this autobiographical bricolage of personal objects and messages was a material reflection of the personal narratives first encouraged through the consciousness raising methodologies of the early feminist movement, where the meeting of small localised groups of women, as Coote and Campbell delineate, created a means of ‘drawing political conclusions from their personal experiences’ (Coote, Campbell 1987:5).⁷ At the same time, the decoration of the fence also makes a compelling proposal for how non-violent protest might find potent strategies through a creative response, its power rooted in a cumulative presence over nine miles of perimeter fence.

⁷ For further contemporaneous accounts of consciousness raising see Coote and Campbell (1987), in particular, pp. 5-7.

According to Brett, these creative methodologies speak of the conditions in which art is practiced by women under systems of patriarchy:

Whereas the typical male attitude has stressed professionalism in art as a special realm from which the other parts of life are shut out, women made no break between their lifestyle and their art practice, they often extracted meanings from materials directly associated with their lives, not with art history. (1986:139)

Brett's argument finds resonance in dematerialized and relational practices, such as Lygia Clark's *Collective Body* series of 1958, performances that responded to the repressive political conditions of her native Brazil by inviting individuals to thread themselves together in collective constellation. In more direct connection to feminist concerns, Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago's 1972 collaborative art project *Womanhouse*, initiated by the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, became an important model for other artists who might want to explore the implications of woman's domestic labour⁸ as installation, action or object.⁹ Shapiro's later idea of *femme* also shows how artists sought to examine the dialogue between the artisanal labour of the amateur, the individualized artist and the collective. Shapiro conceived of *femme* as a means through which domestic activities of stitching and handicraft such as quilting, could attain the status of art, whilst also referencing

⁸ In their introduction to the *Womanhouse* catalogue, Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro wrote of how 'Womanhouse became the repository of the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away' (Chicago, Shapiro: 1972: n.p.).

⁹ *Womanhouse* found a British equivalent several years later in 1974. In *A Woman's Place*, Kate Walker invited the artists Phil Goodall, Patricia (Chick) Hull, Catherine Nicholson, Su Richardson, Monica Ross and Suzy Varty to construct environments for the rooms at the South London Women's Centre.

collective and socialized ways of making. She explores this in works such as her patchwork painting *Connection* (1978), which, as Brett confirms, realigned art practice towards the artisanal, the amateur and the collaborative signified by models of female labour.¹⁰

Alternative self-supporting infrastructures were also initiated to advocate the recognition of female artists within an art system overwhelming designed for men. In a precursor to the separatist protest at Greenham, organisations such as the London Women's Liberation Art Group and The Women's Workshop (later the Women Artists Collective) campaigned from 1972 for female parity within the Artists' Union as well as providing supportive workshops and points of connection for women artists. The Art History Collective carried out important advocacy and rehabilitation work on the canon of women artists, whilst organisations such as the Women's Free Arts Alliance and the Women's Liberation Workshop later played important roles in promoting equality and visibility for women artists. The artist Margaret Harrison would later suggest, on the occasion of a 1977 issue of *Studio International* devoted to women's practice, that this period represented 'the beginnings of a feminist consciousness' and 'a forceful and progressive struggle to write ourselves back into history' (Harrison: 1977: 212).

This was certainly the case for women opting to work with film, video and performance. Famously, a number of film-makers chose to withdraw their work from *Film as Film*, a major exhibition of formal film at the Hayward in 1979. The women

¹⁰ For example, women artists' work with textiles was the subject of the 1984 publication, *The Subversive Stitch, Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* by Rozsika Parker, and *The Subversive Stitch* exhibition at the Cornerhouse, Manchester in 1988.

rejected the modernist canonisation that the show enacted on artists' film practices, a process that relegated women to a marginal and contested place.¹¹ The impetus of this collectively voiced withdrawal, in concert with the regular meetings about women artists' film histories and practices, which had been convening at the London Filmmakers' Co-op, was to provide the basis for the founding of *Circles*, a film and video distribution organization for women. The collective was charged with advocating the work of women artist film-makers neglected by history and disseminating contemporary work while encouraging new pluralist practices that employed film, video, performance and tape-slide. As their first catalogue showed, many of the works explored questions of relevance to feminist debate such as domestic labour, exemplified in Joanna Davis's *Often During the Day* (1978); feminist identity, such as Lis Rhodes's *Light Reading* (1978); sexuality and the body seen in works including Carolee Schneemann's infamous *Fuses* (1964) or Robina Rose's *Birthing Rites* (1977) and women's histories, notably Pat Murphy's *Rituals of Memory* (1979). As a model of feminist solidarity in action, the events at Greenham offered potent subject matter for Tina Keane, Jo Davis, Lis Rhodes and Annabel Nicolson, four of the artists working with film and video through feminist artists' networks such as *Circles* and the Women's Workshop. As I shall argue, the films, performances and video installations of these founder members of *Circles* exemplify the ways in which feminist struggles of the time were being meaningfully brought into creative practice.

¹¹ The women who withdrew and wrote the collective statement [in the exhibition catalogue](#) were: Jane Clarke, Jeanette Iljon, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy, Annabel Nicolson, Lis Rhodes, Felicity Sparrow and Susan Stein.

To return to Brett's observations about the blurring of art and life through practice, the artist Tina Keane also brought the subject matter of her lived experience into a body of works that moved between performance, tape-slide, video and installation. She was a founder member of the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, along with Rose Finn Kelcey and Mary Kelly, and was also involved in researching histories of women artists. In the tape-slide/video work *Clapping Songs* (1981), for example, she drew on the playground games of her young daughter, whilst the participatory installation *Play Pen* (1978) brought surveillance cameras into the context of the nursery. Other work sought a political dialogue between history and self, such as in the meditative film *Shadow of a Journey* (1979) made with Rose Finn Kelcey, in which the shadows of the two friends are cast over the sea, against an archive recording of the voices of women remembering the Highland clearances. Keane's practice could be seen to reflect an ongoing enquiry into how art might articulate and instrumentalize feminist thought in relation to female experience, drawing across a range of different media to articulate and examine the artist's dual identity as an artist and mother.

The protests at Greenham Common find early form in *Bouquet/video tree* (1984), a nine monitor video sculpture Keane exhibited at the Royal College of Art, which makes the connection between the Greenham peace camp and the fate of Maggie Wall, the last woman burned as a witch in Scotland in 1571.¹² *In Our Hands*

Greenham, Keane's installation shown later that year at the British/Canadian Video

¹² The installation was shown in the group show *Cross Currents: Ten Years of Mixed Media* curated by Catherine Elwes and Chrissie Iles. Elwes recalls the installation as a cluster of monitors hanging 'in a loose bunch from the ceiling with their cables trailing, giving them the appearance of being weightless' (e-mail correspondence, 15 November 2015).

Exchange in Toronto, employed video technology of the period as a means of capturing the collective and anarchic energy of Greenham. Keane created a palpable sculptural presence in the gallery by suspending twelve monitors within a vertical grid of scaffolding and, in the imagery, exploited early video effects such as superimposition, and extended temporal duration through looping and repetition. A regular visitor and participant at Greenham, Keane filmed the Embrace the Base event on super 8 film, and combined the images of the women joining hands around the fence with footage of a spider. Using the new video superimposition tool, chroma key, Keane composited the spider and the shadow of a hand slowly moving, so that they appear as silhouetted shapes that enclose Keane's footage of the singing women embracing the base, bathed in a shifting spectrum of colours. The performative element of the overlaid hands, in the bright hues of the paintbox effects software now available to video artists, also recalls Keane's later work *Faded Wallpaper* (1988). Developed from a series of performances at Tate Britain (1984) and the Serpentine Gallery (1986) Keane responds to the novella *Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the Victorian writer Charlotte Gilmore Perkins's famous intimation of feminist consciousness, in which a woman perceives her oppression in the wallpaper of the room where she is sequestered. In her video, the visceral ripping through layers of wallpaper in Keane's original performance becomes a technologically animated collage of photographic and moving images, similar to the techniques used in *In Our Hands Greenham*. In both works we also perceive a layered and fragmented authorial presence, which inscribes the works with the artist's questioning dialogue, which, it could be argued, concerns the conflicts of her creative identity. The hand central to *In Our Hands Greenham* suggests singular agency and enquiry, while the footage of Embrace the Base held within its shadow alludes to the interplay of collective and individual so

central to the personal/political axis of feminist politics in general and Greenham in particular, where the tactile joining of hands and bodies was a key gesture in the women's protests. Jean Fisher interprets the pivotal image of the hand in Keane's installation as a reflection of Greenham's 'primary metaphor' of 'women's industry (productivity)' (1993: 39). She sees the spider as a positive symbol that connects the acts of spinning and weaving associated with women's labour to the collective activism of the camp: '[I]mages of a spider spinning her web are juxtaposed with footage of the women's activities – joining hands around the base, weaving webs of wool to symbolise strength in unity' (Fisher: 1993: 39).

A further spatial reference to the dialogue between collective and individual can be discerned within the lateral spread of the work's installation as a video wall. The individual hands enclosed within each monitor retain their singularity, yet are multiplied to suggest the many. The twelve monitors become anthropomorphized, referencing the women's bodies, as hands appear to transcend the boundaries of the screen and reach across each other. Keane's notes for the installation indicate her desire for the monitor grid to 'give the impression of a blockade',¹³ yet its confrontational configuration of scaffolding also suggests the wire fencing of the military camp's boundary fence, in a spatial evocation of the Embrace the Base event. The interposition of collective and individual is also emphasized in the use of sound. *In Our Hands Greenham* celebrates the protest songs that were a vital part of Greenham's non-violent strategies. Composed of original and customized folk songs,

¹³ Tina Keane, 'In Our Hands Greenham, Video Installation Diagram', REWIND online resource. www.rewind.ac.uk/database/searchrewind.php?table_name=REWIND&function=details&where_field=id&where_value=150&Section=Media. Accessed 15 November 2015.

these were witty, jeering and provocatively sung through the wire fence; for sound carries even where bodies are shut out. Across twelve monitors, the sound of the women's singing is repeated, relayed and echoed in an audio dialogue between screens, creating a spatialised collage of sonic protest, underlining again the collective, multi-voiced nature of Greenham activism. It could also be argued that the work's monitor presentation, in concert with the grainy quality of the images, referenced the televisual, and was in some sense a corrective to the overwhelmingly negative media coverage that Greenham received. *In Our Hands Greenham* might thus be seen as Keane's exploration of video technology as a creative tool in opposition to its institutional use as an agent of media representation, and a simultaneous celebration and honouring of the collective power of the women's protest.

Television culture and the TV industry had played a significant part in the self-definition of video art in Britain since David Hall first wrote of broadcasting's pervasive power in the 1970s.¹⁴ When Channel 4 was founded in 1984, it developed a dialogue with artists' groups, in particular the Independent Filmmakers' Association and this interchange was formative in the development of the channel's culture remit. It opened up a more promising and less oppositional dialogue with artists, which ultimately brought more experimental works to the screen¹⁵. This was the case with Jo Davis and Lis Rhodes's 1983 series of thirteen short films, collectively entitled *Hang on a Minute*. Rather than appropriate the language of television and transpose it to the

¹⁴ See, for example, David Hall (1976), 'Video Art: Towards an Autonomous Practice', *Studio International*, May/June, pp. 248-53.

¹⁵ For an account of artist's involvement with Channel 4 see Stephen Partridge, Sean Cubitt (eds) (2012), *Rewind: British Artists' Video in the 1970s and 1980s*, John Libbey: Indiana University Press.

gallery, Rhodes and Davis were invited to actively infiltrate broadcast programming. Each one lasting but a minute, the films were modelled as a series of alternative advertisements to be dropped into the commercial breaks, arresting the viewer with their fleeting experimental expositions of current political situations, particularly those which affected women such as domestic violence and pornography.

The films shared a collage aesthetic uniting photographic stills, text and animation, overlaid with the songs and orchestrations of the feminist composer Lindsay Cooper. Two episodes in particular, *Goose and Common* and *Ironing to Greenham*, both address Greenham Common directly: the former exploring the land ownership at Greenham and the latter embodying a feminist wish fulfilment, featuring a woman thinking aloud about escaping her domestic confinement to join the protestors at the air base. Rather than presenting the interior monologue of an individual, *Goose and Common* focuses on the government's illegal requisitioning for military purposes of what was once common land, something Davis and Rhodes also touch on in *Petal for a Paragraph*, another film from the series. The subject of property, law and power is an enquiry that runs throughout Rhodes's work in particular,¹⁶ and *Goose and Common* uses a collage of voice-over and song against images that speak of the measurement and boundaries of territory. Created on film with rostrum camera and optical printer rather than with the video effects used by Keane, the work features fragments of maps, magnified and overlaid, that become tangled webs of lines. These markings and place names cumulatively speak of the palimpsest of contested claims and political agendas that have overwritten the land of the British Isles throughout its

¹⁶ Most recently in film installations such as *In the Kettle* (2010) and *Dissonance and Disturbance* (2012), seen in her 2012 exhibition *Dissonance and Disturbance* at the ICA in London.

history. We can also find fleeting sequences of footage shot by Rhodes at Greenham, where she was a regular visitor. A particularly striking image is that of the women who managed to break through the fence to hold hands and dance on the silos, in an echo of those protests at the Pentagon that had offered an early model of feminist non-violent protest. However, the outspoken nature of the *Hang On a Minute* inserts was deemed too politically sensitive by Channel 4, and the programmes were never aired.¹⁷ As a result, *Goose and Common* was never able to make its argument about the illegal nature of the Greenham base, at a time when many of the women protestors were being driven off the land through the enforcement of local bylaws.

Annabel Nicolson, who worked closely with Rhodes, Davis and others at Circles, also found Greenham Common to be a significant point of focus in her creative development, enabling her to fold feminist perspectives more overtly into her film and performance practices than had previously been apparent. Whilst she was drawn to the collective aspect of a protest culture expressed in voice and in the tactile language and actions of linking hands and bodies, Greenham's rural environment and the everyday rituals and activities of camping there, were also a source of inspiration.

Nicolson turned to the camps at Greenham with the heightened attentiveness to the fugitive and ephemeral aspects of experience that had characterized her previous work in film and performance, thus 'creating a situation in which something can be perceived, things that are already there in life' ([Nicolson quoted in](#) Prestidge 1982: 2).

Nicolson's visits to Greenham from 1982 enabled her to draw out the protest's more profound mythical and elemental connotations in her *Fire Film* (1982), thus inflecting

¹⁷ Some of the programmes have since been shown individually in the context of Rhodes's wider body of films, such as during *Lis Rhodes: Dissonance and Disturbance* at the ICA, from January to March 2012.

her reading of the protest there with a deeper echo of the past beyond its immediate political urgencies. The work features a group of women gathered around one of the many campfires that sustained them at Greenham Common. Here they exchange news and thoughts with the fire providing warmth, nourishment and marking the points of political and topographical orientation at the gates around the perimeter fence.

The play of light and shadow central to the artist's early film performances, such as *Jaded Vision* (1973),¹⁸ had already taken an elemental turn when the electronic light beam of the projector was replaced by the flare of the match in her paracinematic play on cinema in the participatory performance *Matches* (1975), and her use of a literal 'cauldron of fire suspended from the ceiling' in the earlier performance *Per(forming)* (1978) (Sparrow 2003:5). I would further argue that the folkloric associations of fire that she brings forth in her work also proposed alternative forms of agency and power to the military fire-power of nuclear weaponry. *Fire Film* presents fire as both burning beacon and the succour of the hearth. We too are mesmerized by the fire caught in Nicolson's fixed camera, and by the conversations of the women around it she has recorded: discussing their life at the camps.

The film, and Nicolson's experiences at Greenham, provided the starting point for a new use of fire in conjunction with performance in a work entitled *Fire Performance*, or *Red Words* presented as part of a programme at the London Filmmakers' Co-op in 1982 but using the adjacent space of the Musicians' Collective. In this work, Nicolson also lights a fire, but rather than recreating the drama of a flaming cauldron, here the

¹⁸ For further details of Nicolson's earlier film performances, see Lucy Reynolds, (2009) *British Avant-Garde Women Filmmakers and Expanded Cinema of the 1970s*, unpublished thesis, University of East London, available through Ethos at the British Library.

fire is modest and makeshift, ‘a little night light, and that was the only source of light in the room so all they could see was my hands’ ([Nicolson quoted](#) in Prestidge 1982:2). The evocative sound that accompanied Nicolson’s performance drew upon different registers of the female voice: from keening and cattle calls to the songs of the Greenham women, as Zoe Redman’s [poetic](#) impression of the event reveals:

she blows out the lights we are left in darkness sounds begin to haunt the space wailing it is Swedish women’s voices calling for their cattle sharp biting sounds ... the wailing stops and she slowly gets up and lights the fire it is very quiet there is nowhere to look but at the fire the flames after leaving us a few minutes to ponder at the fire she sings a song – take the toys from the boys ... (Redman 1982: 87)

The songs that were a potent part of the Greenham protests, were also transcribed by Nicolson, and published alongside her impressions of the camps in an issue of *Feminist Art News*, which she guest edited the same year, focusing on the subject of Women’s Space. The issue shows how Nicolson’s interest in Greenham’s camp fire culture also explores the significance of the tents, benders and other structures that characterized the camps. It is worth noting two performances that predate the protests at Greenham, *Hidden Sounds* at the Musician’s Collective in 1979, and the 1980 performance *Cries* at the Festival of Women’s Work in Performance.¹⁹ Both works allude to ideas and images of shelter, imagining the role of tents as a resonant space for female dialogue, for speaking and singing, not just as a respite from the elements.

¹⁹ This took place at the Midlands Group Gallery. It could be conjectured that Nicolson’s earlier interest in a women only space, predating her visits to Greenham, reflects the creation of Circles. A more thorough investigation of this link is outside the scope of this article, and is to be followed up.

She writes in relation to *Cries*, of how ‘I wanted a tent to make a tent a space another space for things which can’t be expressed...’[sic] (O’Pray 1983:85). As the artist in residence at Norwich School of Art in 1983, Nicolson materializes this desire in the gallery there, as part of her exhibition *Concerning Ourselves*. She erects *Menstrual Hut*, a tent-like construction designed as a gathering space for other women artists.

Edged with bricks and topped with bulrushes, *Menstrual Hut* resembles the makeshift benders of Greenham; at the same time, it evokes spaces set aside for female reflection in other cultural contexts, such as in Native American rituals. Nicolson’s guest-edited issue of *Feminist Art News* thus addresses the debates in feminism concerning how women might assert a space of agency within patriarchal society, whilst her distinctive montage of handwritten and typed text, drawings and photographs, close-ups of the surface of the Menstrual Hut along side images of the women’s actions at Greenham, asserts her directly creative engagement with these questions.

Nicolson’s *Menstrual Hut* might however be seen as a utopian construction, which makes an address – or readdress – to the dilemmas faced by women artists of the post-war period. For how should a woman artist engage a feminist dimension in her work, when film and video were most often associated with the advocacy and urgency of activism, which excluded more experimental engagements with the medium? Sally Potter could perhaps be said to exemplify that quandary early on, when she observes in a 1973 interview that, ‘the women’s lib films that I’ve seen all use such totally outdated and archaic and also reactionary structures [...] so that what comes across is a straight TV documentary’ (Potter quoted in Glassner 1973:46). The perception that feminist discourse remained solely in the field of politics and outside the modernist

experimentations of the visual arts, with its attendant notion of artistic identity and authorship as an act of singular creativity, was also noted as problematic in a contemporaneous study of experimental film-makers and feminism by Jan Rosenberg. She observed the difference in the approach of feminist film-makers working in documentary and narrative modes, and those of women artists who ‘continue to make films, which explore personal consciousness, sexuality, childhood and other ideas compatible with feminism from a more subjective and psychological perspective’ (Rosenberg 1983:41). Nicolson herself has also retrospectively observed the potentially reductive nature of an engagement with feminist concerns, when she asserts, in relation to earlier works such as her 1973 film performance *Reel Time*, ‘I was aware of being female but feminism – you know, the balance of power – those kind of issues, that wasn’t what I was thinking about’ (Reynolds: 2009). Rosenberg’s study and Nicolson’s remarks thus point to the ambivalent position, and conflicted sense of identity experienced by women artists working with film and video; where an explicit feminist agenda would seem to limit the range of their expression, as well as the formal methods through which they might achieve it.

However, by the 1980s, the modes of protest at Greenham Common – whether through song, sound or the growing collage of artefacts and memorabilia woven into the perimeter fence – reflected the movement’s growing confidence about the possibility for a creative articulation rooted specifically in feminism that could encompass, as Brett has argued, a broader understanding of what constitutes art practice. Within this invigorated landscape, these four artists prove the case that Greenham Common could provide a potent source for creative practice to meet the challenge of political protest from a feminist perspective. The protests at Greenham

could thus be seen to offer a paradigm, not only for feminist methodologies of non-violent protest and a renewed notion of creative practice, but also for how artists working specifically with the technologies of film and video might frame feminist discourse and dissent beyond a documentary remit. The film and video works I have discussed fuse feminist and anti-nuclear advocacy with more nuanced portraits of this unique protest event; they celebrate its collective spirit in a multi-video spectacle, map its contested terrains for a broadcast context, and evoke older elemental agencies of voice and fire. This extraordinary and vital body of work generated by the peace camps at Greenham Common [continues to offer compelling](#) strategies for feminist principles [to](#) speak with and through art: exploring the resonant dialogue between collective activism and singular practice.

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